

Binge-watching on Reels/Shorts in Social Media Ecosystem: A Study on User Motivation, Gratification and Behavior

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The advent of digital media has led to the rise of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, which enable users to create and share short-form video content - commonly referred to as Reels or Shorts. These user-generated videos, often featuring trending music, dance challenges, or film dialogues, are designed to attract widespread engagement and achieve virality. While many users produce such content to gain visibility, popularity, and engagement, others consume it—both actively and passively—without time constraints. This pattern of continuous engagement, particularly prevalent among younger audiences, signals a surge in digital participation that raises questions about shifting social and psychological needs. The primary objective of this paper is to quantitatively analyze and assess this emerging socially driven behavior among younger generations. The findings provide insights into the intersection of digital gratification, self-presentation, and habitual media use.

Keywords: Addiction, Behavioral Pattern, Binge watching, Technology, Virtual Living.

Introduction

Any piece of media, whether textual or visual, that conveys information to an audience is collectively referred to as a media message. Such messages may include text, images, audio, video, graphics, or animation. From time immemorial, print and electronic media dominated the communication landscape, but this trajectory shifted with the emergence of virtuality. Digital media introduced virtuality as a new dimension of media messages through the rise of social media and OTT platforms.

The content of digital media is both innovative and diverse, often characterized by hashtags and user-generated posts tailored to specific newsfeeds. It empowers users to actively participate in content creation rather than remain passive consumers. Digital platforms today are saturated with material shaped by digitization and emerging technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, visual graphics, trending reels, and other innovations in visual content. These developments have enabled individuals to visualize and imagine life from entirely new perspectives.

From communication and entertainment to gaming and artistic creation, digital platforms provide users with competitive, cooperative, and immersive experiences by blending content with technology. The design of digital content aims to captivate audiences by simulating virtual realities and enriching social interactions. In doing

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so, digital media fosters a dual mode of existence for its users—simultaneously inhabiting both the real and the virtual spheres.

Virtuality and Vertical Video Revolution

Digital media has provided users with a virtual space for constructing digital personas, allowing them to customize and self-present by projecting a particular image to the public. This space not only enables individuals to tailor their self-presentation according to personal preferences but also facilitates the creation of visual elements such as photographs and short-form videos. These short-form videos—commonly referred to as Reels or Shorts (e.g., Instagram Reels, Facebook Reels, and YouTube Shorts)—are part of the ongoing “vertical video revolution.” Compared to horizontal videos, vertical videos have gained immense popularity due to their suitability for social media consumption.

The vertical video trend began with the launch of TikTok in 2018, which ushered in a new era of short-form video content. TikTok’s cost-efficient, spontaneous, and trend-driven format attracted millions of users, leading to billions of downloads worldwide. Videos created on the platform often reached millions of views within weeks, highlighting its broad reach and engagement. Building on TikTok’s success, Instagram introduced “Reels” in August 2020, followed by YouTube’s release of “Shorts” in March 2022. Although each platform differs in its time limits for uploaded content, all continue to grow rapidly. These apps empower social media users to evolve into content creators by recording, editing, and sharing their creations with ease.

Reels: Creation and Usage Characteristics

The real driver behind the rapid growth of Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube lies in their adoption of short-form video strategies. To create such content, users can record and edit video or photo clips, synchronize them with music, and then share them through their feeds or stories. Importantly, Reels and Shorts are not limited to one’s own network; users can view content from any account through the dedicated Reels/Shorts tab, regardless of whether they follow or are connected to the creator.

The duration of these short-form videos varies across platforms. For instance, TikTok allows videos up to 60 seconds, Instagram and Facebook Reels permit 60-second uploads, while YouTube Shorts can run up to one minute (with in-app creations limited to 15 seconds).

The content of short-form videos is highly diverse. It may include informational snippets, psychological reflections, celebrity-driven challenges, performances set to trending songs or film dialogues, user-generated storytelling, silent clips with self-explanatory visuals, jump-cut edits, lip-syncing or dance routines, “how-to” demonstrations, promotional materials, travel or food diaries, product reviews, giveaways, motivational messages, hacks, advertisements, or even casual vlogs of daily life. This diversity ensures that almost every aspect of day-to-day experience can be represented, making the format instantly relatable to users.

What makes these videos particularly engaging is their ability to integrate music, filters, text, and visual effects, enabling creators to enhance storytelling and capture attention. For many users, especially those feeling isolated or distressed, scrolling through Reels and Shorts becomes a form of escape, entertainment, and emotional relief. At their core, these videos are designed with one central purpose: to make viewers “stop and stare.”

The algorithms behind short-form videos further amplify their impact by fostering media dependency, driving high audience engagement, and stimulating creativity through user-friendly tools such as text overlays, filters, and visual effects. Any video designed within this ecosystem must therefore meet certain underlying criteria: to capture attention, sustain interest, and encourage interaction.

- i. *The capability to grab **Attention**- usage of thumbnails.* Creative and interesting Thumbnails has the magnetic force to attract the users.
- ii. *The capability to retain **Interest**-the content flow.* The information flow within the video has to be short, clear and attention-worthy
- iii. *The capability to call to **Action**-the picturisation.* Visual elements used in the video has to make the social media user swipe up and learn more.

Psychology behind Watching Reels/Shorts

Gen Z is known for quickly adapting to activities that provide pleasure and excitement—a tendency referred to as *hedonic adaptation*. Among the many sources of such pleasure, one of the most prominent is the consumption of Reels and Shorts. The algorithms behind these short-form videos are programmed to align with a user’s frame of reference, which is shaped by their viewing and search histories. Reels and Shorts deliver condensed bits of information paired with trending audio content, often drawn from popular films and music albums. These videos play sequentially in auto-play mode, requiring nothing more than a simple swipe from the user.

This mode of consumption has parallels with binge-watching, which originally described the continuous viewing of multiple episodes of television series on digital platforms. However, while binge-watching long-form serialized content on OTT platforms remains popular, the rise of short-form mobile video consumption represents a new dimension of this behavior. Users increasingly find themselves binge-watching Reels and Shorts, despite their much shorter duration. This study focuses on examining the parameters underlying the pleasurable consumption of Reels and Shorts. Drawing on Media Dependency Theory, it seeks to understand the emerging patterns of digital dependency, specifically how these platforms fulfill emotional, cognitive, and behavioral gratifications for users.

Literature Review

Edward Thorndike, the pioneering psychologist, postulated the *Law of Effect* in 1898, which states that when an action is rewarded, the likelihood of its recurrence increases. This principle is evident in child behavior: positive reinforcement such as applause, praise, stickers, or toys encourages children to repeat desirable actions (e.g., cleaning up). Similarly, when social media users receive “invisible rewards” each time they check their phones to watch Reels or Shorts, the stimulus strengthens the habit. What begins as a rewarding experience can gradually evolve into an obsession, followed by habitual behavior (Thorndike, 1898).

Building on theories of media interaction, Gauntlett (2009) introduced the concept of *Media Studies 2.0* on his website, Theory.org.uk. This framework highlights how internet-based technologies have reshaped the media ecosystem by blurring geographical boundaries and transforming the ways users encounter, interact with, and contribute to media content. Gauntlett emphasized that media production has shifted from being exclusively professional to becoming a participatory and creative everyday practice. His reflections focus on the participatory possibilities of media users, encouraging scholars to examine how individuals engage with the media ecosystem and experience hyper-mediated environments (Gauntlett, 2009).

In a related vein, Ruggiero (2000) explored the interpersonal and qualitative aspects of mediated communication, noting that the gratifications of social media not only attract audiences but also sustain their attention, thereby fostering social engagement (Ramayan et al., 2018). Building on this, studies adopting a Uses and Gratifications (U&G) perspective have investigated audience engagement (Rubin, 2009). The U&G framework, an audience-centered approach, posits that individuals actively select media channels to fulfill specific needs (Rubin, 2009). Social media, with its emphasis on user-generated content, offers a unique set of gratifications distinct from traditional media forms (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Social Engagement through Virtual Spaces

Social engagement in virtual spaces fosters community, transparency, conversation, and connectedness (Power, 2014). Social media, in particular, promotes two-way communication, feedback, and information sharing (Mutum & Wang, 2011).

Such engagement has a profound impact on users’ lifestyles—shaping how they live, exist, and relate to one another. This tendency is closely tied to *hedonic adaptation*, defined as the “decline in emotional affective intensity irrespective of circumstances” (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). Users therefore pursue activities that provide recurring pleasure, while social media algorithms are deliberately designed to minimize the effects of hedonic adaptation. This dynamic underpins the rise of short-form vertical videos, popularly known as Reels or Shorts.

The prominence of vertical framing, however, is not new. Historical precedents can be traced to Asian and pre-Renaissance European art, where visual compositions often employed vertical orientations, demonstrating that visual art need not conform to a fixed aspect ratio. This tradition laid the groundwork for later developments in digital imaging (Navarro-Güere, 2023). With technological advancements, portable

screen devices have become ubiquitous, further conditioning users to adapt seamlessly to algorithmic changes and the mechanics of the vertical video revolution (Sébire, 2014).

Short-form Video Revolution

Since the early nineteenth century, a series of technological advancements have shaped the emergence of the vertical video revolution, diversifying audiovisual content formats for public engagement (Amorós & Fontán, 2010). Sanders (2023) observes that vertical videos, often referred to as short-form videos, provide creators with innovative ways to showcase their content. Reports suggest that the rapid growth of social media has shortened human attention spans, thereby increasing the demand for short-form content that gives users a competitive advantage and facilitates engagement with influencers in the digital sphere. The sequencing of such content also shapes consumption experiences, as individuals actively switch between options to maximize enjoyment and pleasure.

Vertical videos, particularly social media Reels, offer an immersive experience in which visual imagery, sounds, events, emotions, and characters form an imagined narrative—what Sunderland (2019) describes as a “fictional diegesis.” This immersive quality captures users’ attention, displacing real-world awareness and reinforcing the pleasures of virtual engagement.

The digital ecosystem has further encouraged users to embrace vertical video by creating a sense of personal connection. According to the *MOVR Mobile Report* (2023), over 94% of users prefer holding their smartphones vertically, as this orientation enhances feelings of virtual presence and engagement. While horizontal formats have traditionally dominated screen-based media such as television and cinema, vertical formats are increasingly preferred for everyday communication, motivational content, and psychological connection (Barakat, 2015c; Slade-Silovic, 2018).

Research also shows that vertical videos in the form of Reels and Shorts generate the highest levels of engagement, outperforming static images and traditional videos in terms of likes and comments (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Thus, vertical short-form video has emerged not only as a technological development but also as a transformative mode of media consumption.

User Behaviors in Virtual Spaces

Devadas (2022) applied the Uses and Gratifications Theory to identify the relationship between narcissism and Instagram Reels usage behaviors—namely creation, consumption, and participation—across age and gender. The study examined seven motivations for Reels usage: socially rewarding self-promotion, entertainment, escape, surveillance, novelty, documentation, and trendiness. It concluded that entertainment seekers were more likely to produce videos and participate actively in Reels. The study further recommended conducting exploratory research to capture untapped gratifications behind Reels usage.

Leung and Meng (2021) examined audience ratings of TikTok usage patterns and gratification-seeking behaviors. The gratifications identified included escape, fashion, entertainment, information seeking, money-making, sociability, navigability, modality, and interactivity. The study explored gratifications in relation to age and usage patterns, finding that users who were open to new innovations and experiences tended to engage more actively with TikTok.

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) analyzed the motives behind Instagram usage in relation to narcissism and contextual age. The motives measured in this study were surveillance/knowledge about others, documentation, coolness, and creativity. Among these, surveillance/knowledge about others emerged as the most influential motive, with Instagram serving as a tool for enhanced interpersonal interaction, cultivating coolness, and expressing creativity.

Alhabash and McAlister (2014) explored motivations for using Facebook and Twitter, extending the concept of virality to social networking platforms. In this context, virality was defined as a way of capturing consumer interest and influencing online behaviors toward content shared in virtual spaces. Virality has since become an indicator of online message effectiveness, regardless of the type of content—such as images, videos, Reels, or paid promotions. It is measured through multiple approaches, including

- The *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM), which is focussed on content sharing within and across platforms.
- *Click-through-rates* (CTRs) and page views as measures of effectiveness of the posted content.
- *Retaining audience engagement*, which includes viewing content, liking/disliking, sharing, and commenting.

A predominant factor in the above-mentioned approaches is the ability to retain and sustain user engagement. This is a psychological process that contributes to virality but does not, in itself, define it. For any social media post—whether a Reel, status update, or story on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube—to achieve virality, the idea, visuals, and content must be carefully designed in line with updated technological innovations. The vertical video revolution, for instance, has enabled the adoption of innovative methodologies for digital storytelling, incorporating new forms of visual language (Navarro-Güere, 2023).

User-Generated Content in Virtual Spaces

Any post that is power-packed with information and visual entertainment—whether a viral meme, a performance or challenge based on trending film lyrics with relevant hashtags, a themed humorous post, or viral content created by ordinary Instagram users, influencers, or YouTube celebrities—can contribute to massive reach and high engagement. Such Reels and status updates often generate significant views, likes, shares, and comments across social media platforms (Ananda et al., 2023). The algorithms behind Instagram/Facebook Reels and YouTube Shorts are designed as repositories of user-generated content, enabling users to watch videos

while exchanging rewards based on the level of entertainment they provide. These platforms curate an endless, uninterrupted stream of short videos, where users navigate simply by swiping up or down (Devadas, 2022). The absence of natural stopping cues often leads users to binge-watch continuously, without clear limits or interruptions.

Bingeing and Gratifications

Bingeing helps users experience enjoyment and provides positive gratification (Podgorelec, 2020). Bingeing, or binge-watching, refers to the consumption of condensed media content over an extended period of time (Schweidel & Moe, 2016). This practice offers users a highly rewarding experience, filled with pleasure and enjoyment, and has the potential to replace reality with virtuality (Flayelle et al., 2020). Binge-watching often functions as a stress-buster, reducing anxiety and fostering more relaxed and positive feelings (Troles, 2019). Flayelle et al. (2019) categorized the emotions associated with binge-watching into positive emotions—such as passion, pleasure, gratification, and satisfaction—and negative emotions, including guilt, loss of control, and addiction.

Building on this premise, the present research aims to explore the science of watching social media Reels and its influence on users' psychological and emotional well-being. Specifically, it seeks to analyze how the pleasure derived from Reels has evolved into a socially driven behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Media Dependency Theory

Media Dependency Theory was postulated by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976). This theory is based on Uses and Gratifications Theory and Agenda Setting Theory. People use media for varied reasons, starting from information sharing to entertainment and establishing relationships. According to this theory, the more the user is dependent on the media, the more important media becomes for that user. In such a case, media expresses power and authority over the user.

Media Dependency Theory outlines three mediated relationships, which include society vs. media, media vs. audience, and society vs. audience. These mediated relationships indicate that users engage in media only based on their needs and the gratifications they experience. The three mediated relationships provide three gratifications to users to meet their needs. First is the need to understand the user's social sphere. Second is the need to act in an efficient and significant manner within that social sphere. Third is the need for escape or to run out of the social sphere during times of emotional turbulence.

The virtual sphere of social media gives its users a chance to fulfil all the above-mentioned gratifications in one way or another. Apart from this, the social media sphere gives users a chance to follow personalities and celebrities of importance, establishing a parasocial relationship. This relationship is expressed by the sense of

rewarding experience through the “likes,” “shares,” or “comments” on the newsfeed of the platforms. As a result, many users love swiping up and down the newsfeed just to enjoy the inexplicable pleasure it provides, as it makes them forget reality and live in virtuality. Social media thus helps users realise the third gratification—that is, the need for escape from their physical and mental worries.

Vertical video creation, or social media reels as they are popularly known, in the same way gives virtual users a sense of gratification that provides inexplicable pleasure and enjoyment, making them escape into virtuality. This demonstrates the power of agenda-setting through trending reels/shorts and stories that become viral.

Building on the existing literature on motivations, gratifications, and media consumption, it is evident that while several studies have explored general social media use, research specifically examining vertical video platforms (Reels/Shorts) remains limited. Moreover, the application of Media Dependency Theory (MDT) to understand the cognitive, affective, and behavioral drivers of such consumption is still underexplored. Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to systematically investigate the motives behind Reels/Shorts consumption and their influence on engagement behaviors and habitual usage, guided by the theoretical framework of MDT.

The main objectives of the research paper include:

- i. To ascertain the motives behind watching vertical video like reels/shorts,
- ii. To analyze the level of watching reels/shorts,
- iii. To identify the gratifications that people achieve from watching Instagram Reels,
- iv. To understand the influence of pleasure on the Reels usage motivations and
- v. To examine the habitual activity of watching vertical video and its influence on behavior.

To address these objectives, the study poses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What are the primary motives and gratifications driving users to consume vertical videos (Reels/Shorts)?
- **RQ2:** How do cognitive, affective, and behavioral motives relate to different engagement behaviors in Reels consumption?
- **RQ3:** To what extent do these motives predict habitual usage patterns and dependency on short-form video platforms?

Hypotheses (H): Based on the theoretical framework of MDT, the study also tests the following hypotheses:

- **H1 (Need to Understand – Cognitive Motives):** Users with stronger cognitive motives, such as seeking trend awareness and social updates, will exhibit higher frequency of Reels/Shorts consumption.
- **H2 (Need to Act – Affective Motives):** Higher levels of pleasure and social gratification will be positively associated with engagement in self-presentation behaviors, such as sharing, commenting, and creating fashion-oriented content.

- **H3 (Need to Escape – Behavioral Motives):** Users driven by escape motives will demonstrate increased habitual viewing patterns, including binge-watching and potential neglect of other responsibilities.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate the motivations, gratifications, and behavioral outcomes of binge-watching Reels/Shorts on social media, within the framework of Media Dependency Theory (MDT).

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative survey design, supported by descriptive and exploratory analysis. A structured questionnaire (Appendix 1) was developed based on three mediation models derived from the postulates of the Media Dependency Theory, focusing on the research objectives.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was adopted to identify active users of social media platforms, particularly those consume short-form media content. Respondents have to satisfy certain pre-requisites. The pre-requisites include: (1) the person should be active on social media platforms, (2) the person should be interested in watching reels/shorts and (3) he/she should have interest and ability to create reels/shorts.

This questionnaire-based survey research was performed through online survey among 300 respondents based on age ranging from 18 to 60 years. After excluding incomplete and redundant responses, a final sample of 256 participants was retained for the analysis.

Instrument

These questions were categorised as mediation models (Appendix 1) based out of the research objectives and derived from the postulates of the Media Dependency Theory:

- **Need to Understand:** Motives behind using the social sphere and the gratifications involved it.
 - Motives behind watching reels/shorts
 - Frequency of watching reels/shorts
- **Need to Act:** Social Presentation and performance within the social sphere and the pleasure motives that engages the user.
 - Gratifications achieved by watching reels/shorts
 - Influence of pleasure behind watching reels/shorts
- **Need for Escape:** Using reels/shorts for relief from distraction and coping during emotional turbulence.

- Behavioral influence on watching reels/shorts

Each item was measured on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The instrument was pretested for clarity, and internal consistency was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 across all dimensions, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data Analysis

The study employed a quantitative design and the data were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis summarized participant responses across the three mediation models to highlight prevailing motives, gratifications, and behavioral patterns.

For inferential analysis, Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to examine associations between:

- **H1:** Hours spent watching Reels/Shorts and cognitive motives (*Need to Understand*)
- **H2:** Pleasure-based motivations and self-presentation behaviors (*Need to Act*)
- **H3:** Escape-related motives and habitual behavioral outcomes (*Need to Escape*)

Findings

Descriptive Analysis

The questionnaire comprised demographics and categories based on the research objectives (Appendix I), which include gender, choice of platform, and frequency of watching reels/shorts.

This research study focused on 300 respondents. After compilation, a total of 256 survey responses were taken for further analysis. The analysis of the findings was categorized as analysis of the demographics, followed by the compilation of the results according to the three mediation models mentioned in the previous section, and finally an inferential summary based on hypothesis testing to understand the level of correlation among the parameters.

Table 1. Demographics of the Respondents

CATEGORIES	FREQUENCY
Gender	
Male	117
Female	139
Choice of Platform	
Facebook	73
Instagram	99
YouTube	84
Frequency of Watching Reels/Shorts	
30 mins	16

<1 h	42
Between 1 and 3 h	61
From 3 to 5 h	78
More than 5 h	59

Table 1 depicts the demographics, revealing that the majority of respondents, with respect to gender, are female, though the difference is slight. Females tend to watch more vertical videos, as they are generally more sociable and emotional compared to males, who are more informative and content-oriented. The majority of respondents prefer Instagram for watching vertical videos over YouTube or Facebook. Instagram, as a social media platform, provides its reel-watchers with greater media engagement, enriched visual aesthetics, and more features compared to YouTube and Facebook. The frequency of watching reels shows a significant breakthrough, with most users spending between one to three hours—or even more—on the activity. This clearly indicates that users tend to consume more vertical video content, as it lacks a natural stopping cue.

Analysis

Table 2. Analysis of Motives and Gratifications behind watching Reels/shorts

	SA	A	N	D	SD
Motives					
To see “status updates” of my friends	83	109	51	9	4
To follow/interact with friends	63	91	57	31	14
It is fun and entertaining	21	43	137	36	19
To broaden my circle of friends	53	143	34	20	6
To creep through other people's posts	59	71	83	31	12
Gratifications					
To find like-minded people	41	91	77	27	21
To create stories/show off my skills.	61	111	81	8	3
To self-promote and become popular and viral	55	102	77	11	5
To archive and share my life	31	79	102	32	12
Because reels/shorts are new and watching it amuses me	25	98	83	37	13

Many respondents tend to use the social sphere for a variety of reasons, whereas watching vertical videos in the form of Reels/Shorts offers certain peculiar advantages. Although motives and gratifications vary according to user perspectives, the predominant objective is to understand the psychology behind watching Reels/Shorts (Table 2).

With respect to motives, the results reveal that “status updates” serve as the primary attraction point for most users to initiate the process of watching Reels/Shorts. A majority of respondents agreed that they explore social media mainly to follow and interact with friends, which helps them broaden their social circle. Some users also indicated that they use social media to explore and observe other people’s posts.

On the other hand, watching vertical videos in the form of Reels/Shorts provides significant gratification. Most respondents believe that the social media sphere enables them to find like-minded people while offering options to archive and share aspects of their lives. More than 90% of the respondents claimed that Reels/Shorts,

being relatively new, amuse and fascinate them, motivating them to create stories and showcase their skills and creativity. Users further agreed that custom-created stories in the form of Reels/Shorts can function as vehicles for self-promotion, helping them gain popularity and remain on-trend or viral (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Graphical Representation for the Analysis of Motives and Gratifications behind watching Reels/shorts

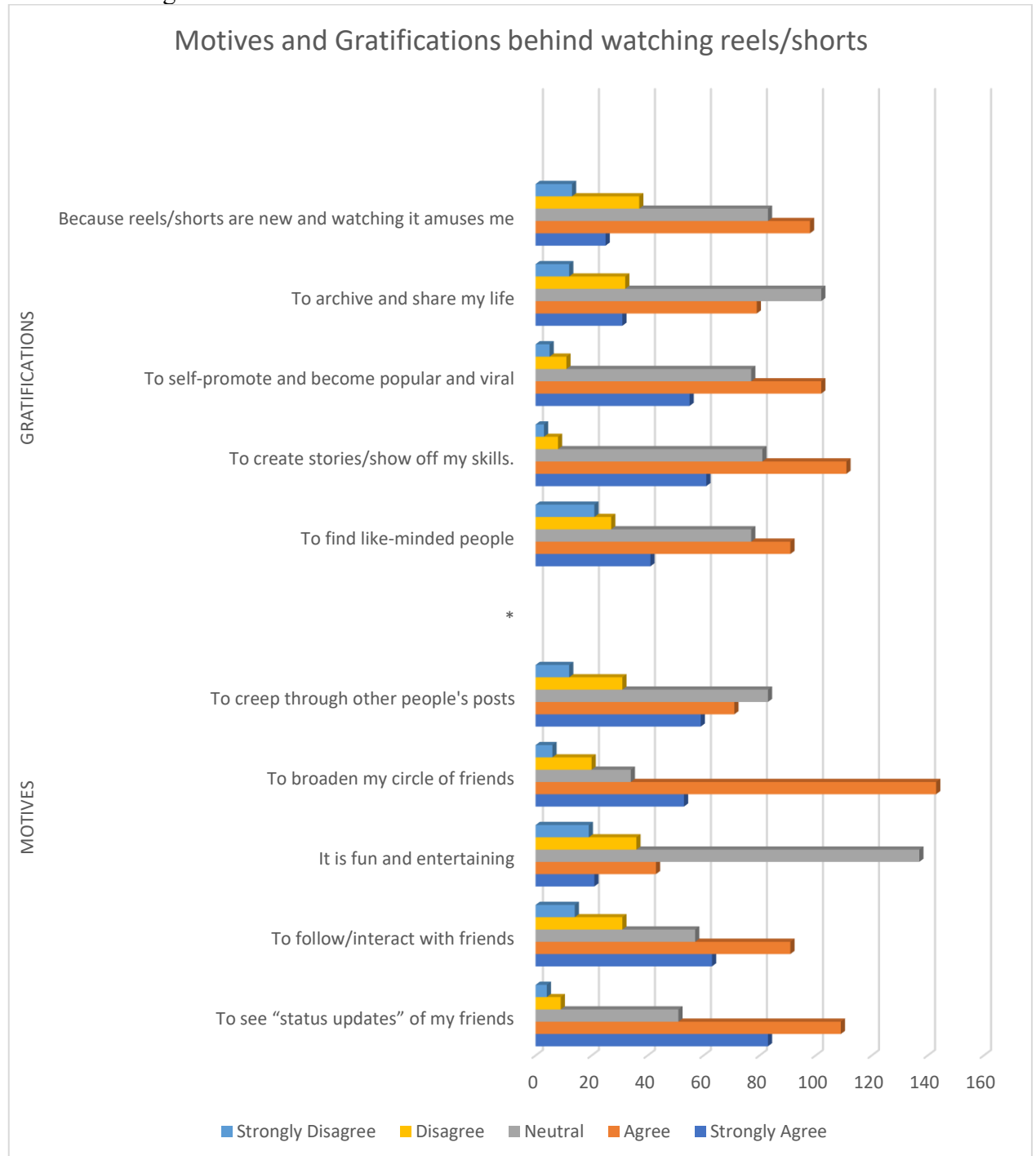
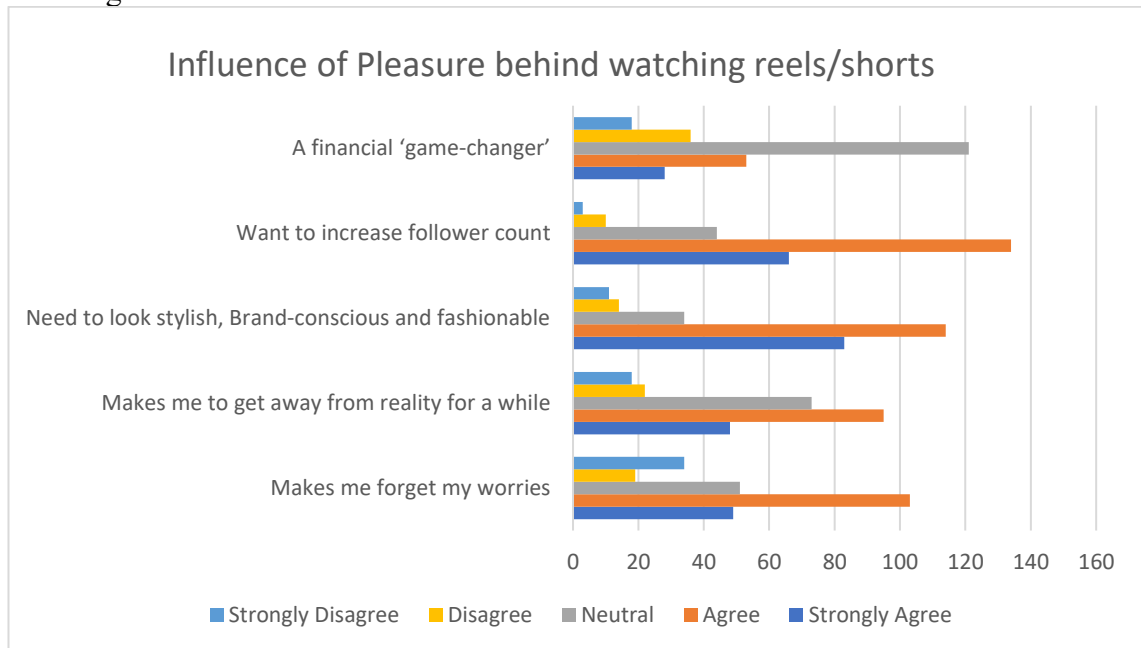


Table 3. Analysis of Influence of Pleasure behind watching Reels/shorts

Influence of pleasure	SA	A	N	D	SD
Makes me forget my worries	49	103	51	19	34
Makes me to get away from reality for a while	48	95	73	22	18
Need to look stylish, Brand-conscious and fashionable	83	114	34	14	11
Want to increase follower count	66	134	44	10	3
A financial 'game-changer'	28	53	121	36	18

Watching Reels/Shorts, although often a monotonous activity, ultimately depends on the user (Table 3). This activity can be sustained only when it engages with emotional psychology. Many respondents agreed that watching Reels/Shorts allows them to momentarily escape reality, and prolonged viewing provides an inexplicable pleasure—a pleasure that transcends pain. Beyond personal gratification, a significant benefit lies in the potential to increase followers or friend counts. The vertical video revolution is therefore not merely about watching Reels/Shorts; it has also become a financial game changer. Once users begin creating their own videos, the process gives them confidence while enabling them to present themselves as stylish and fashionable (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Graphical Representation for the Analysis of Influence of Pleasure behind watching Reels/shorts



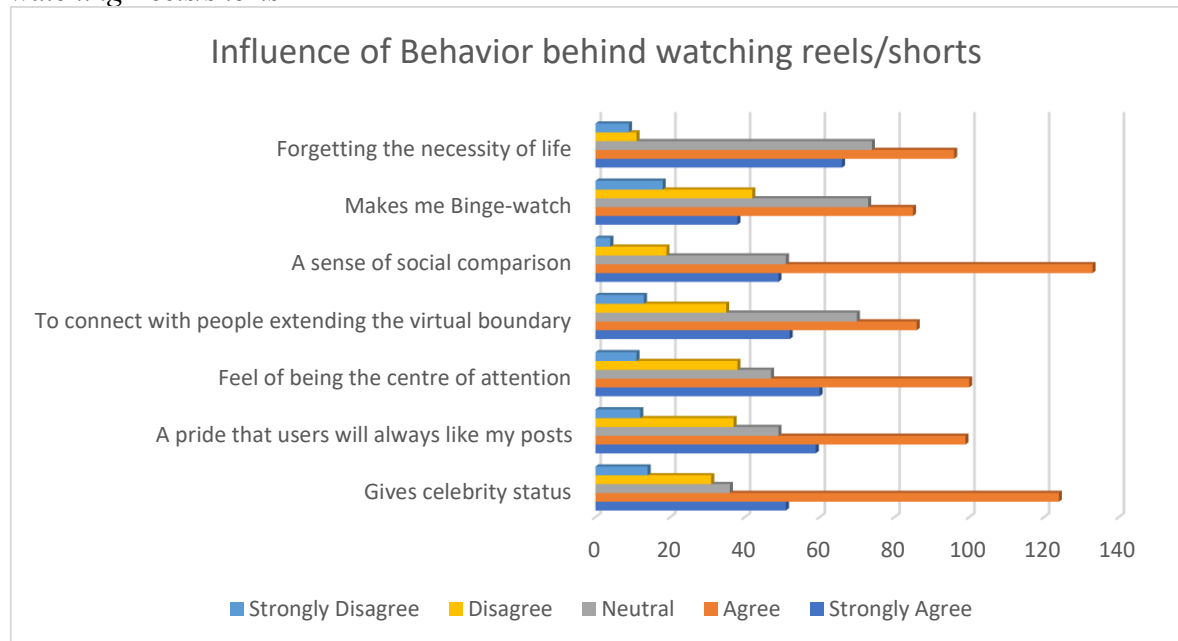
Although watching Reels/Shorts provides considerable pleasure, it also influences users' behavioral practices (Table 4). Users are affected by this vertical video revolution, as creating Reels can confer a sense of celebrity status along with an added tinge of confidence and pride when others like their posts. Many respondents agreed that this perceived celebrity status helps extend their virtual friendship boundaries. Respondents also noted that creating Reels to attract the attention of other users positions them as an attention hotspot, thereby increasing their sense of social comparison across

multiple dimensions. These heightened states of pride, attention-seeking, and status maintenance lead users to invest more time exploring Reels and Shorts, motivating them to create additional content aligned with trending topics. This process is highly engaging and, for many users, sufficiently addictive that they may temporarily forget everyday necessities, immersing themselves in their virtual existence (Figure 3).

Table 4. Analysis of Influence of behavior behind watching Reels/shorts

Behavioral influence	SA	A	N	D	SD
Gives celebrity status	51	124	36	31	14
A pride that users will always like my posts	59	99	49	37	12
Feel of being the centre of attention	60	100	47	38	11
To connect with people extending the virtual boundary	52	86	70	35	13
A sense of social comparison	49	133	51	19	4
Makes me Binge-watch	38	85	73	42	18
Forgetting the necessity of life	66	96	74	11	9

Figure 3. Graphical Representation for the Analysis of Influence of behavior behind watching Reels/shorts



Inferential Analysis

To test the proposed hypotheses, both chi-square tests and Spearman's rank-order correlations were performed. The findings of which are given as under:

H1: Need to Understand (Motives → Frequency of Watching)

Chi-square analysis testing the association between *hours watched* and *cognitive motives* (e.g., status updates, broadening circles) yielded non-significant results, $\chi^2(4, N = 256) = 0.00, p = 1.00$. However, Spearman's correlation indicated a *weak*

positive association between frequency of watching and social-informational motives ($\rho = 0.18, p < 0.05$). This partially supports H1, suggesting that higher cognitive motives are modestly linked to increased viewing frequency.

H2: Need to Act (Pleasure → Self-Presentation)

Pleasure items (e.g., feeling stylish, increasing followers) were correlated with self-presentation behaviors (e.g., celebrity status, pride from likes). Results indicated a moderate positive association, $\rho = 0.28, p < 0.01$. Although chi-square tests again returned non-significant outcomes [$\chi^2(4, N = 256) = 0.00, p = 1.00$], descriptive distributions supported the trend. These findings support H2, confirming that pleasure-driven motives reinforce self-presentation behaviors.

H3: Need to Escape (Escape Motives → Behavioral Dependency)

Escape-related motives (e.g., forgetting worries, escaping reality) showed the highest mean scores across all categories. Correlations with behavioral outcomes (e.g., binge-watching, forgetting necessities of life) were positive and moderate-to-strong, $\rho = 0.30, p < 0.01$. While chi-square outputs remained non-significant [$\chi^2(4, N = 256) = 0.00, p = 1.00$], descriptive evidence strongly supports H3, indicating that escape motives predict habitual and dependency-related behaviors.

Discussion

This study examined motives, gratifications, and behavioral outcomes of watching short-form videos (Reels/Shorts) through the lens of Media Dependency Theory (MDT). Findings confirm that individuals depend on media to satisfy cognitive, affective, and behavioral needs, aligning with the triadic postulates of MDT.

As users engage with Reels/Shorts, they become fascinated with the motives and gratifications driving vertical video consumption. The results suggest that cognitive motives—such as staying updated and broadening social circles—are positively correlated with viewing frequency ($\rho = 0.18, p < 0.05$). Users consume these videos for information and gratification, making them highly attractive. The novelty and visual appeal of short-form content provide entertainment and cognitive engagement, fostering a sense of belonging in the digital social sphere. Personalized algorithms and immersive platform designs further amplify dependency.

Analysis of motives and gratifications revealed heightened media engagement. Reels/Shorts, being new and on-trend, amuse users with variegated, visually compelling content requiring minimal attention. Both watching and creating these videos provide satisfaction, fostering habitual consumption. Compared to addictive continuous video gaming, watching Reels/Shorts promotes repeated engagement and habituation.

These videos also encourage self-presentation. Respondents reported heightened pride and social comparison when observing others' content, which enhances recognition, expands social boundaries, and boosts confidence. Over 90% of respondents indicated

that Reels keep them fashionable and relevant, enhancing their digital persona and providing behavioral engagement through validation and influence ($\rho = 0.28, p < 0.01$).

Humans' innate desire for self-expression and social validation is satisfied through Reels/Shorts. Sharing content and receiving feedback motivates users to invest further in creation or consumption, fostering memory and experience. Short-form content presents information concisely and uniquely, appealing visually within the social media environment.

Reels also provide escapism, offering a pleasurable detachment from reality ($\rho = 0.30, p < 0.01$). This immersive experience, however, carries addiction risk, as users prioritize virtual gratification over real-life engagement. The absence of stopping cues amplifies dependency and can displace real-world priorities.

Rapidly evolving content feeds encourage extended virtual engagement to maintain simulated pleasure and stay informed about trends. Binge-watching Reels stimulates pleasure hormones, generating cycles of continued engagement and reinforcing immersion in virtuality.

From the MDT perspective, users consume vertical videos to maintain relevance within the virtual ecosystem. Reels provide social updates and factual snippets, enhancing social awareness and mitigating FOMO, satisfying the first postulate of "need to understand" and cognitive gratification. Pleasure-driven motivations, including posting, creating, or watching content, allow users to self-present, gain social validation, and regulate emotions. These motivations also support influencer or celebrity status, aligning with affective and behavioral gratifications.

Finally, Reels/Shorts enable users to escape reality and form parasocial relationships with celebrities, reinforced through likes, shares, and comments. Many users scroll continuously to enjoy the pleasure provided, fulfilling the need to escape from physical and mental concerns.

Collectively, these gratifications make watching Reels/Shorts a habitual behavior among the current techno-generation, fostering physiological dependency. Users engage with this content not only for entertainment but also to satisfy deeper needs to understand, act within, and escape from their social environment.

Conclusion

Vertical videos in the form of Reels/Shorts comprise a realm of short-form content designed for rapid consumption and entertainment in today's fast-paced world. The social media environment, featuring vertical videos, fosters emotional resonance and relatability, providing users with fulfillment and enjoyment through built-in parameters such as ease of access, personalized algorithms, and immersive design. Together, these features create a digital ecosystem that satisfies users' emotional, cognitive, and adaptive needs.

Reels/Shorts also serve as avenues for self-expression, identity construction, and social validation, offering emotional escape and behavioral reinforcement. Each viewing experience can trigger increased hormonal responses aligned with pleasure and reward, encouraging users to prioritize virtual gratifications over real-life interactions.

Furthermore, Reels/Shorts facilitate digital escapism—disconnecting from reality and immersing in virtuality—which fulfills users' social and emotional needs. By presenting a curated version of virtual reality, Reels/Shorts enable social comparison within the social media sphere. The emotional stimulation derived from these videos elevates dopamine levels, a neurotransmitter associated with happiness and reward, enhancing engagement through personalized, user-generated content. Platform algorithms encourage continuous scrolling, creating a seamless flow of information and a strong sense of continuity.

While these gratifications provide enjoyment and engagement, they can also induce behavioral changes with potential risks. Excessive consumption may affect attention span, psychological and emotional well-being, and lead to long-term dependency. The repeated dopamine stimulation reinforces the habit, making the activity both rewarding and potentially addictive. Over time, this socially driven habit may develop into a consistent behavior and, eventually, a personality trait in the emerging digital generation.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that can guide future research. First, the current study focuses on Instagram Reels users from a limited territory; therefore, caution is needed when generalizing the findings, as patterns may differ across nations and cultures. Second, the study primarily examines Reels engagement behavior through a content analysis based on the applied theoretical framework; aspects such as doomscrolling, engagement influence, content creation, and related consumption behaviors were not examined. Third, while the study explores motives behind Reels usage, variables such as age and gender were not incorporated into the research process. Finally, the study relies mainly on descriptive statistics, with limited inferential analysis performed for validation.

Future research could include age as a dependent variable to analyze Reels usage behavior, investigate media consumption through doomscrolling, and conduct comparative studies across various platforms.

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Appendix I Questionnaire

Demographics

1. Name
2. Gender Male/Female
3. Choice of platform Facebook/Instagram/YouTube

Section I-Need to Act

Motives behind watching reels/shorts

4. To see “visual status updates” of my friends.
5. To follow/interact with friends
6. It is fun and entertaining
7. To broaden my circle of friends
8. To creep through other people's posts.

Frequency of watching reels/shorts

- 30 mins
- <1 h
- Between 1 and 3 h
- From 3 to 5 h
- More than 5 h

Section II-Need to Understand

Gratifications achieved by watching reels/shorts

9. To find like-minded people
10. To create stories/show off my skills.
11. To self-promote and become popular and viral
12. To archive and share my life
13. Because reels/shorts are new and watching it amuses me

Influence of pleasure behind watching reels/shorts

14. Makes me forget my worries
15. Makes me to get away from reality for a while
16. Need to look stylish, Brand-conscious and fashionable
17. Want to increase follower count
18. A financial ‘game-changer’

Section III-Need to Escape

Behavioral influence on watching reels/shorts

19. Gives celebrity status
20. A pride that users will always like my posts
21. Feel of being the centre of attention
22. To connect with people extending the virtual boundary
23. A sense of social comparison
24. Makes me Binge-watch
25. Forgetting the necessity of life